

WAHI

THE SUPERNATURAL BASIS OF ISLAM

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1. The Yogic View of the Quranic Trance

In discussing Islam, most non-Muslims and ex-Muslims tend to focus on the negative achievements of Islam, such as Islamic mistreatment of women and unbelievers. However, we should realize that in its essence Islam is only secondarily an ethical system with a characteristic record of conduct. In the first place, it is a belief system, a truth claim. **The Islamic religion** stands or falls with the truth or untruth of two assertions: (1) there is no God but Allah, the Creator of the universe; and (2) Mohammed is the final spokesman of Allah, who through him passed on to mankind a series of messages assembled in the **Quran**. This Quranic communication is understood to have been a constant process of "*revelation*" from AD 610, when Mohammed was 40, until his death in AD 632.

The first belief is a theological claim which Islam has in common with some other monotheistic religions, and which, if subjected to cunning interpretation, could even be reconciled with some schools of polymorphous-theistic Hinduism ("*the wise call the one True One by many names*"). The second belief, by contrast, is the truly defining truth claim of Islam, setting it apart from every other religion: the prophethood of Mohammed.

In this essay, originally published as a series of articles in the on-line monthly *Kashmir Herald* in autumn-winter 2002-2003, we will discuss some non-Islamic views of this core assertion of Islam. The present chapter will focus on the Hindu view of Mohammed's prophethood.

Before the colonial age, there was hardly any Hindu evaluation of Mohammed's prophetic claims or even of Islamic doctrine in general. **The first detailed criticism of Islam, and in particular, of the Quran, was written by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Vedic reform movement Arya Samaj in 1875.** He mainly lambasted the contradictions, irrational

beliefs and inhumane injunctions in Islamic scripture. Later Arya Samaj criticism of the Prophet typically focused on his dictatorial and immoral personal behaviour (e.g. Rajpal's *Rangila Rasul*, about Mohammed's sex life), not on the source of his "revelations".

The basis of Islam is the belief that Mohammed regularly went into a state of trance (*Wahi*) and heard a voice dictating Allah's own words. In recent years, Hindu students of Islam have invoked the eyewitness testimony of Mohammed's contemporaries in support of their own skeptical rejection of the Prophet's claim of receiving divine messages: "*The Meccans stood firm by their gods; their faith in the gods was not at all shaken by Muhammad's attacks. Allah reports: 'When it was said unto them there is no God save Allah, they were scornful, and said: Shall we forsake our gods for a mad poet?'* (Q.37:36-35) '*And they marvel that a warner from among themselves had come. They say: This is a wizard, a charlatan.'* (Q.38:4-3)" (S. R. Goel: *Hindu Temples*, Vol. II, 2nd Ed., Voice of India, Delhi 1993, p. 334)

It was probably Swami Vivekananda who first connected the questionable nature of Mohammed's leadership with the nature of his prophethood. Mohammed had to be ruthless in imposing adherence to his belief in his own divine mission because this belief could not stand on its own, based as it was on a delusion. **If your neighbor, whom you have known for years as an ordinary businessman, tells you one day that he is hearing God's voice and that you have to obey his divine instructions from now on, you would not readily give in to his demand, would you?** Instead, you would certainly wonder what has happened to him. So, Vivekananda offered one hypothesis of what had happened to Mohammed so as to make him believe in his own selection as God's sole living spokesman.

The specifically Hindu contribution to our understanding of the Quranic revelation is to bring in the yogic experience. As an example of how yogic practice can go wrong, warning against the dangers of experimenting with yoga without competent guidance, Vivekananda mentioned Mohammed: *"The yogi says there is a great danger in stumbling upon this state. In a good many cases, there is the danger of the brain being deranged, and, as a rule, you will find that all those men, however great they were, who had stumbled upon this super-conscious state without understanding it, groped in the dark, and generally had, along with their knowledge, some quaint superstition. They opened themselves to hallucinations. Mohammed claimed that the Angel Gabriel came to him in a cave one day and took him on the heavenly horse, Buraq, and he visited the heavens".*

"But with all that, Mohammed spoke some wonderful truths. If you read the Koran, you find the most wonderful truths mixed with superstitions. How will you explain it? That man was inspired, no doubt, but that inspiration was, as it were, stumbled upon. He was not a trained Yogi, and did not know the reason of what he was doing. Think of the good Mohammed did to the world, and think of the great evil that has been done through his fanaticism! Think of the millions massacred through his teachings, mothers bereft of their children, children made orphans, whole countries destroyed, millions upon millions of people killed! (...) So we see this danger by studying the lives of great teachers like Mohammad and others. Yet we find, at the same time, that they were all inspired. Whenever a prophet got into the super-conscious state by heightening his emotional nature, he brought away from it not only some truths, but some fanaticism also, some superstition which injured the world as much as the greatness of the teaching helped." (Vivekananda: Complete Works, vol. 1, p. 184, from his book *Raja Yoga*, Ch. 7: *"Dhyan and Samadhi"*)

Mental disturbance as a consequence of meditative experiments had already been named as the cause of the Quranic revelations by Gisbertus Voetius, a 17th-century Dutch Calvinist theologian who trained missionaries for conversion work in Indonesia (discussed in Karel Steenbrink: *Dutch Colonialism and Indonesian Islam. Contacts and Conflicts 1595-1950*, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta 1993). Protestants, who had abolished monastic institutions and were scornful of the ascetic practices of Catholic and Orthodox monks, liked to point out such dangers, and their warning seemed to apply to the case of Mohammed as well.

Most yoga manuals emphatically warn against wrongly practising the techniques of *Hath Yoga*, which are very powerful whether used properly or in disregard of the concomitant rules. Yogic masters can relate anecdotes of pupils or colleagues who spurned the precautions and practised dangerous forms of *pranayam* ("breath control" or "control of the vital energies") till they impaired their nerve systems. One well-known written testimony of the painful and lasting effects of erratic yogic practice is given by Gopi Krishna in his well-known book '*Kundalini, the Evolutionary Energy in Man*'. (1967, still available in many Indian and overseas editions). Arya Samaj leader Vandemataram Ramachandra Rao told me of one case involving a friend of his who inflicted brain damage on himself and died of a stroke as a consequence of improper *pranayam* practice. Likewise, the Taoist energy-steering system of *Qigong* comes with the same warning and similar anecdotes. Many mystic phenomena the world over come about as cases of stumbling upon certain states of consciousness, which may lead to some kind of "enlightenment" but also to serious delusions. The most typical among these is *megalomania*, witness the self-importance of the assorted gurus and messiahs in the modern cult scene.

Hindu yogis claim to have left these dangerous mind games behind because their forebears have developed a safe and sound method laid down in such classics as Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Ram Swarup (*Hindu View of Christianity and Islam*, Voice of India, Delhi 1993, p. 45-46) argues that the methodical and systematic "science of yoga" has a substantial qualitative edge over other forms of mysticism or mediumism. From this angle, it is unfair -- even if fashionably in tune with the "equal truth of all religions" doctrine -- to put *yoga* in one class with the experiments of Shamans taking hallucinogenic plants, or with the uninvited voice-hearing experiences of Mohammed.

In recent years, Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel have further developed Swami Vivekananda's position on the nature of Quranic revelation. Ram Swarup has elaborated on the yogic theory of Samadhi states of different levels of purity, which allows for states of high concentration tainted by delusion (*Hindu View of Christianity and Islam*, p. 107). S.R. Goel has pointed out the similarity between Mohammed's experiences and those of other men who combined a susceptibility to convulsive trance states with a great charisma and strategic ability, most notably Chengiz Khan (Goel, ed.: *The Calcutta Quran Petition*, 3rd ed., Voice of India, Delhi 1999, p. 238-249; with reference to Ibn Ishaq: *Sirat Rasul Allah*, translated by Alfred Guillaume: *The Life of Mohammed*, OUP Karachi, p. 104/150-107/154).

They conclude that the Pagan Arabs had every right to reject Mohammed's claims, born from a deluded consciousness and then propagated on a war footing, but that they made the one mistake which history does not forgive, viz. the mistake of being defeated. However, "*the fact that they failed to understand the ways of Mohammed and could not match his mailed fist in the final round should not be held against them. It was neither the first nor the last time that a democratic society*

succumbed in the face of determined gangsterism. We know how Lenin, Hitler and Mao Tse Tung succeeded in our own times." (Goel: *Hindu Temples*, vol. 2, 2nd ed., p. 272)

As far as I can see, the foregoing constitutes the single most radical criticism of Islam available in the world. Christian critics, no matter how fierce, usually appreciate at least Mohammed's monotheism, which does not impress these Hindu authors. They are also inhibited in criticizing the deluded nature of Mohammed's "revelations", as they profess a belief in the divine revelations to the Old Testament prophets. Though "irreverent" and "demythologizing" are among the most specious words of praise in the review columns of modern newspapers, few people have the stomach for something as irreverent and demythologizing as the Hindu revivalist analysis of the Prophet's mission.

2. The modern view of the Quranic trance

Some modern Western and even some Muslim-born scholars have diagnosed the process of Quranic revelation to Mohammed as a case of *paranoid delusion*. For now we shall discuss the analysis offered by the Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson. In his Penguin monograph '*Mohammed*', p.76-79, he starts out by rejecting the allegation that Mohammed's claim to receiving visions in a state of trance (*wahi*) was fraudulent. This allegation has of course been made by Christian polemicists against Islam, but also by modern leftist sympathizers of Islam seeking to recast Mohammed in the mould of a social progressive. In order to further his purported programme of social reform, Mohammed is said to have enacted the role of conveyor of God's injunctions merely to carry more conviction with an audience steeped in religion. Against this line of thought, Rodinson argues:

"Modern advances in psychology and psychiatry have made short work of such simplistic explanations of fraud, whether

justifiable or otherwise. The reaction may even have gone too far in the other direction, for there have been, and still are, cases of real fraud. But their number is limited. At all events, it is now generally understood and admitted that certain individuals can sincerely believe that they are the recipients of visual, auditory and mental messages from the Beyond; and also that their sincerity is no proof that these messages really come from where they are claimed to come."

So, where did the Quranic messages come from?

"It is the concept of the unconscious that has enabled us to understand these things. () One has only to dip into psychology text-books to find a hundred perfectly bona fide cases of people in a state of hallucination hearing things and seeing visions which they claim quite genuinely never to have seen or heard before. And yet an objective study of their cases shows that these are simply fresh associations produced by the unconscious working on things which have been seen or heard but forgotten."*

Just like a dream, a hallucination recombines old sensory and mental impressions:

"It is therefore conceivable that what Muhammad saw and heard may have been the beings described to him by the Jews and Christians with whom he talked. It is understandable that, in the words that came to him, elements of his actual experience, the stuff of his thoughts, dreams and meditations, and memories of the discussions that he had heard, should have re-emerged, chopped, changed and transposed, with an appearance of immediate reality that seemed to him proof of some external activity which, although inaccessible to other men's minds, was yet wholly objective in its nature."

Throughout his career as a Prophet (except, as we shall see, at the very beginning), Mohammed genuinely believed that the

visions and spoken messages which he "received" were of divine origin. His *wahi* or Quranic trance seemed to make a far deeper impression on his mind than any ordinary human experience could, and he therefore considered it supremely real.

Today, both in mental hospitals and in the cult scene, you can find numerous people who likewise believe to be regular recipients of messages from Above. In some cases, these people manage to make others believe in their claims, too. They then set themselves up as cult leaders, revered by a group of followers as their direct telephone line to God or the spirit world. It is not uncommon for people who regularly hallucinate to function fairly normally in the world, sometimes even highly successfully. Thus, Joan of Arc derived from her visions the strength to lead an army against the British invaders of France. Chengiz Khan transmuted the shamanic messages from his god *Il-Tengri* into a trail of battlefield victories founding a far-flung empire, which disintegrated a few generations later. In terms of durability and ultimate geographical expansion of his religio-political empire, Mohammed was the single most successful voice-hearer in world history.

It is only in a very few cases later on in his career that both contemporaries and later scholars of Islam have found reason to cast doubt on the genuineness of certain instances of his Quranic trance. These are the cases where the divine messages received during *wahi* were just a little too convenient not to look like Mohammed's self-serving fabrications. The best-known instance is when Mohammed received permission from Allah to marry Zaynab, the repudiated wife of his adopted son Zayd. Under Arab customary law, this union was prohibited, but in a timely revelation (Q.33:37, 33:50), Allah exempted Mohammed from this law. Christian polemicists against Islam have often cited the Zaynab episode as proof of Mohammed's insatiable lust, but in fact its indication of self-serving

manipulation of the *wahi* by Mohammed is more damaging to the Islamic belief system.

According to Rodinson, "*It is true that, later on, some disturbing characteristics did appear. Muhammad had to take day-to-day decisions, decisions of a political, practical and legislative nature, which could not wait for some unspecified moment when the spirit might see fit to breathe on him. He was constantly under fire, bombarded with questions and requests for advice. The divinely inspired nature of his replies gave them a solid basis of authority. Did he yield to the temptation to nudge the truth a little? Some of the revelations correspond a little too closely to what might have been the Prophet's own human desires and calculations. Or was it, once again, his unconscious at work? We shall never know.*"

These few somewhat suspect instances should at any rate not make us lose sight of the general case: "*When his soul was thus plunged into the void (*) Muhammad then attained periodic states of ecstasy in which he felt that he had been stripped of his own personality, submitting passively to the invasion of a mysterious force, (*) he experienced the phenomena described above - seeing and hearing things, either inwardly or outwardly, in the mind or the imagination. We find these ecstasies and sensory phenomena in a very similar form among persons suffering from recognized mental conditions such as hysteria, schizophrenia and uncontrolled verbalization.*"

If anything can dispel the lingering doubt about Mohammed's genuine belief in the reality of his trance visions, it is the description of his own reaction when these psychic phenomena started. Rodinson: "*A study of Muhammad's earliest messages, coupled with a perusal of accounts of the crises of doubt or despair which preceded or accompanied them, can only produce a skeptical attitude towards the theories which see them as evidence of a coolly calculated plan carried out*

ruthlessly from motives of either ambition or philanthropy. And these accounts do seem to be authentic. Tradition, concerned to stress the supernatural affiliations of Muhammed's personality, would not have invented from scratch such very human traits."

3. Mohammed's reaction to the Quranic trance

The first person to doubt the genuineness of the Quranic "revelations" was Mohammed himself. This was at the very beginning of his career, when during his Ramadhan retreat outside Mecca in AD 610, he had an audio-visual experience in which he both heard and saw the archangel Gabriel, calling upon him to "*Recite!*" (*Iqra*, from *Qara'a*, whence *Qur'an*) Upon receiving his first "revelation", Mohammed thought he was going mad, or in the parlance of those days, that he was getting possessed by an evil spirit.

He didn't want to spend the rest of his life as Mecca's village idiot, and so, preferring death to disgrace, he decided to throw himself from a high rock: "*Now none of God's creatures was more hateful to me than an ecstatic poet or a man possessed: I could not even look at them. I thought, Woe is me poet or possessed -- Never shall Quraish [i.e. his fellow tribesmen of the Quraish tribe] say this of me! I will go to the top of the mountain and throw myself down that I may kill myself and gain rest.*" (Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, translated by Alfred Guillaume: *The Life of Mohammed*, p.106/153)

The history of Islam could have ended there and then, with Mohammed escaping the spell of the alleged evil spirit by jumping to his death. But the ghost himself came to the rescue, as Mohammed testified: "*So I went forth to do so and then, when I was midway on the mountain, I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'O Mohammed! Thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel'.*" (ibid)

So, the vision repeated itself. We don't know if that was sufficient to reassure Mohammed about his sanity, but then another and more decisive factor intervened to save him: "*And I continued standing there, neither advancing nor turning back, until Khadija sent her messengers in search of me and they gained the high ground above Mecca and returned to her while I was standing in the same place; and he [i.e. Gabriel] parted from me and I from him, returning to my family.*" (ibid)

It was indeed his wife Khadija who saved him and helped him to accept the trance states as they became a recurring and then a regular feature of his life. Later on, she supported him when others doubted his prophetic claims: "*By her, God lightened the burden of His prophet. He never met with contradiction and charges of falsehood, which saddened him, but God comforted him when he went home. She strengthened him, lightened his burden, proclaimed his truth, and belittled men's opposition.*" (Ishaq/ Guillaume: 111/155) But more importantly, she supported and soothed Mohammed in the crucial phase when he himself entertained the deepest doubts about his own sanity.

This is how she did it. When Mohammed came home, he told her: "*Woe is me poet or possessed.*" But she replied: "*I take refuge in God from that, o Abul Qasim [i.e. "father of Qasim", after Mohammed's first son Qasim]. God would not treat you thus since he knows your truthfulness, your great trustworthiness, your fine character, and your kindness. This cannot be, my dear. Perhaps you did see something.*" And Mohammed answered: "*Yes, I did.*" (Ishaq/ Guillaume: 106/153)

Certainly Mohammed had seen something, meaning that his sensory nerves had indeed produced a visual sensation. But was it a false sensation, or in the parlance of the day, the impact of ghost-possession? Khadija and her Christian cousin Waraqa b. Naufal eagerly embraced the idea that Mohammed had had a

genuine vision and had been invested with the mantle of prophethood, but Mohammed himself, with his skeptical-Pagan background, still had his doubts. Fortunately, his loving wife knew a way to decide the matter and convince him of both his sanity and his new prophetic mission.

She asked him to notify her when his visitor returned so that they could verify whether he really was the archangel Gabriel or an ordinary demon. *"So when Gabriel came to him, as he was wont, the apostle said to Khadija, 'This is Gabriel who has just come to me.' 'Get up, o son of my uncle', she said, 'and sit by my left thigh.' The apostle did so, and she said, 'Can you see him?' 'Yes', he said. She said, 'Then turn round and sit on my right thigh.' He did so, and she said, 'Can you see him?' When he said that he could, she asked him to move and sit in her lap. When he had done this, she again asked if he could see him, and when he said yes, she disclosed her form and cast aside her veil while the apostle was sitting in her lap. Then she said, 'Can you see him?' And he replied, 'No.' She said, 'O son of my uncle, rejoice and be of good heart, by God he is an angel and not a Satan."* (Ishaq / Guillaume: 107/154)

In modern language, this account relates how Mohammed's vision of the Archangel waned and disappeared as his wife turned up the heat of sexual arousal. Narrator Ibn Ishaq adds a second tradition (through Khadija's daughter Fatima, her son Husayn, his daughter Fatima, her son Abdullah b. Hasan) which is even more explicit in this regard, viz. that *"she made the apostle of God come inside her shift, and thereupon Gabriel departed, and she said to the apostle of God, 'This verily is an angel and not a satan.'"* (ibid) The underlying assumption appears to be that a lustful demon, the kind who might take possession of a man's soul, would have stayed around to enjoy the sight of Mohammed and Khadija's sexual intercourse;

whereas an angel with his ethos of renunciation would politely withdraw from the scene.

After his wife had provided him with this experimental proof of the genuineness of his meeting with the Archangel, Mohammed was cured of his doubts. He could now safely embark upon his career as God's exclusive spokesman and frequent recipient of Gabriel's messages, which were written down by a secretary and later collected into a book, *the Quran*. Only on one occasion would the doubt briefly reappear, viz. during the episode of the "*Satanic Verses*".

Frustrated at the unyielding skepticism of his Meccan townsfolk, the Prophet consciously or subconsciously devised a way to win them over to the acceptance of his prophetic claims. He would compromise on the central item in his theology, viz. the falseness of the gods of the Arabian pantheon as contrasted with the unique reality of Allah alone. Modern apologists slanderously depict the Meccan heathens as fanatics intolerant of Mohammed's innovative cult, but in reality they were always eager for reconciliation. They were pluralistic or what modern Indians would call "secular". At a meeting outside their national shrine, the Kaba, they proposed to Mohammed: "*Come let us worship what you worship, and you worship what we worship. You and we will combine in the matter.*" (Ishaq/Guillaume: 165/239) They were even willing to shed some of their religious practices if those of Mohammed were to prove superior: "*If what you worship is better than what we worship, we will take a share of it, and if what we worship is better than what you worship, you can take a share of that.*" (ibid)

It is at this point that Mohammed received an anti-pluralistic and anti-compromise "revelation": "*Say, o disbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, and you do not worship what I worship, and I will not worship what you have been wont to worship, nor will you worship that which I worship. To you*

*your religion and to me my religion" (Q.109; note that both fools and knaves sometimes quote the latter sentence as proof of Mohammed's pluralism, when the context actually shows it to mean the exact opposite) On another occasion, viz. around the deathbed of Mohammed's uncle Abu Talib, the Meccans again pleaded reconciliation and pluralism with the words: "*Let him have his religion and we will have ours*". But once more Mohammed refused all compromise and demanded that they accept his monotheism and his claim to prophethood, nothing less. (Ishaq/Guillaume: 191/278)*

Yet, at one point he did give in to the tempting idea of a quick way to bring the Meccans into his fold, viz. by accepting the reality and auspicious role of the three popular goddesses - al-Lat, al-Uzza and Manat. A revelation duly arrived from heaven, saying: "*Have you thought of al-Lat and al-Uzza and Manat, the third, the other? These are the exalted cranes whose intercession is approved.*" (Ishaq / Guillaume: 165/239) The Meccans were enthusiastic, prostrating along with the Muslims at the mention of the goddesses in Allah's company, and word even spread that they had converted to Islam.

But then another revelation came down, telling Mohammed that he had been deceived by Satan, who had smuggled these goddess-revering words into the channel of the prophet's wahi or revelatory trance, falsely making it look like a divine message on a par with all the others Quranic verses. So Allah annulled the *satanic verses* and sent down the verse: "*We have not sent a prophet or apostle before you but when he longed [viz. for acceptance], Satan cast suggestions into his longing. But God will annul what Satan has suggested. The God will establish his verses, God being knowing and wise.*" (Q.22:51-52; Ishaq / Guillaume: 166/239) Since then, the Quran gives a corrected reading, this one properly revealed by Gabriel himself: "*Have ye seen Lat, and Uzza, and another, the third,*

Manat? () These are nothing but names which ye have devised, ye and your fathers, for which Allah has sent down no authority.*" (Q.53:19-23)

Mohammed got away with it, the indignation among a few of his followers at this lapse from orthodoxy remaining brief and inconsequential. But an objective observer cannot avoid facing the question: if the prophet could be thus deceived by Satan, how could he know on all the other occasions that he hadn't been deceived? The only answer the Islamic apologist can come up with is the one given in the above narrative: God or Gabriel told Mohammed which revelation to believe and which one to reject as false. That way, the only guarantee of revelation is another revelation.

But at least we can sympathize with Mohammed's brief pang of conscience when he realized the deception (he "was bitterly grieved and greatly in fear of God", according to Ishaq/Guillaume: 166/239). Clearly he tried to be honest and bring only genuine revelations to his audience. Unfortunately, the fullness of Mohammed's critical sense vis-à-vis his revelations had been abandoned at the very beginning, when, safe and warm between Khadija's thighs, he had accepted the basic genuineness of the process of divine revelation through the voice and vision of Gabriel.

4. Cultural relativism comes to the defence of Mohammed's *wahi*

There is a school in psychiatry, now well past its prime but quite strong in the 1960s and 70s, which rejects the whole notion that we can arrive at a diagnosis of mental disturbance for people from other climes and cultures. If you tell that crowd about a psychopathological diagnosis of a 7th-century Arab, they will dismiss it as cultural imperialism, as projection of modern notions onto radically different premodern cultures. In non-specialist circles, this cultural relativism is now probably

stronger than ever before: postmodern intellectuals refuse to be "judgmental" about characters from other cultures, including the Prophet of Islam.

Thus, it is argued that more or less controlled and ritualized forms of ghost-possession were an established part of many cultures since thousands of years. This way, Mohammed's Quranic trance (*wahi*) could be justified as a form of Shamanic contact with the spirit world. To be sure, classifying Mohammed as a kind of Shamanic medium would still undermine his claim to a unique status as the final prophet, but it does sound better than labels like "hallucination" or "sensory delusion". Georg Feuerstein (*Holy Madness*, Arkana Books 1992, a book on the interface between religion and altered mental states, p.15) does Mohammed the honour of describing him as a "mystic".

And yet, the relativistic position is refuted by spokesmen of those premodern cultures themselves. It is simply not true that where we see pathological symptoms, the ancients merely saw a state of divine intervention. Some of the terms still in common use as names of specific psychopathological syndromes, such as mania and paranoia, originate with the ancient Greeks. Manuals of Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine already try to classify and treat mental problems. Indeed, it is hard to find any culture which doesn't have a notion of "madness", however vague and general. In this particular case, we cannot say that the 7th-century Arabs already had an embryonic knowledge of psychiatry, but at least they were clearly of the view that there was something wrong with Mohammed's mind.

In our latest chapter, we saw that Mohammed himself initially evinced a healthy skepticism vis-à-vis the visions and revelations which he had started receiving from AD 610 onwards. It was mainly his first wife Khadija who helped him

in getting accustomed to this recurring psychic phenomenon and in accepting his status of prophet. Meanwhile, most of his townsfolk in Mecca remained unconvinced. It is not modern neo-colonial Western psychologists who imposed this skepticism on them; it is clearly they themselves who, within the framework of their own culture, saw sufficient reason to reject Mohammed's belief in his status of recipient of divine revelation.

The Quran itself gives more than a dozen instances where Mohammed, or the "voice" he heard, puts him on guard against the Meccans' view that his revelations are merely the effect of ghost-possession. This is very explicit in the ten verses 15:6, 23:70/72, 34:8, 34:46/45, 37:36/35, 44:14/13, 52:29, 68:2, 68:51, 81:22. *Thus: "They say; 'He suffers of ghost-possession'? No, he came to them with truth but most of them abhor truth."* (23:70/72)

To this list, Mohammed himself adds several references to Biblical prophets likewise accused of ghost-possession: earlier prophets in general 51:52, Noah 23:25, Moses 26:27/26 and 51:39. It is to be noted that the Bible nowhere mentions such an allegation against Noah, Moses or most other prophets. The one exception is verse 9:7 of Hosea, a prophet apparently unknown to Mohammed: *"They call the man of the spirit a madman: so great is their guilt that their resistance is likewise great".* Undoubtedly, Mohammed, whose knowledge of the Bible was only sketchy, was merely projecting his own plight onto Noah and Moses.

To be sure, the Arabs were not modern psychiatrists; they had no clear-cut diagnosis though they were in no doubt that something was wrong. In a few instances, they gave the alternative explanation that Mohammed was an ambitious but fanciful poet who had merely invented it all: Q.21:5, 36:69, 37:36/35, 52:30, e.g.: *"But no, they say: 'A web of dreams. He*

must have invented them. He must be a poet."" (21:5) They also opined that he was "enchanted": 17:47/50, 25:8/9. Mohammed counters this by calling the unbelievers themselves enchanted (23:89/91), but mostly, we again see Mohammed defending himself with the plea that the same allegation had been made against earlier prophets: Moses 17:107/108, Shu'aib 26:185, Salih 26:153.

The argument that "*I am a prophet but am not acknowledged as such by my narrow-minded contemporaries, just as the ancient prophets were not given due recognition either*" somehow manages to make non-recognition into an indication of genuine prophethood. Ordinary people would start doubting themselves when confronted with general skepticism of their beliefs. But not Mohammed, whose reasoning went like this: because I have these revelations from above, because I have the exceptional status of prophet, people reject me or laugh at me, but far from shaking my belief in the divine origin of these visions, this merely proves the weightiness and genuineness of my prophetic mission, for it puts me up there in the top league with prophets like Noah and Moses. For people of the scientific temper, this subjective and self-centred rationalization of the negative feedback that Mohammed encountered can be put aside as just that: a fallacious rationalization of a private belief easily recognized as irrational.

5. Herman Somers' diagnosis of Mohammed

Ever since Mohammed's first preachings, people have tried to pinpoint the psychic ailment accounting for his prophetic self-delusion. Thus, some Christian polemicists described him as an epileptic, citing episodes in which he foamed at the mouth and rolled on the floor. This was a meritorious guess, but its explanatory power was limited because the neurological disorder of epilepsy need not be accompanied by hallucinations and an enduring self-delusion. However, now that psycho-

pathology has matured into a scientific discipline, a more accurate diagnosis is available.

The Flemish psychologist, Dr. Herman Somers, formerly a Jesuit who became a religious skeptic after discovering psychopathological elements in the utterances of some Biblical prophets, has elaborated the first technical diagnosis of Mohammed's behaviour. So far, it is only available in Dutch: *Een andere Mohammed* ("A Different Mohammed", Hadewych, Antwerp 1993), but I will give its general outline in English. The basis of this diagnosis is the elaborate description of Mohammed's personality and conduct provided by the Quran and the Hadith (traditions of the prophet, grouped by theme) and Sira (chronological biography) literature.

As for the nature of these sources, it is worth noting the contrast between Jesus and Mohammed. Jesus is a composite literary character made up of essentially historical reports on a wandering healer-preacher combined with religious stereotypes, partly borrowed from other traditions, and with deliberate interpolations made by the evangelists in compliance with the developing political and theological needs of the budding Church. Mohammed, on the other hand, is a fully historical character.

To be sure, we are aware of unconventional theories questioning the historicity of the entire Mohammed narrative including the Quran (vide e.g. Ibn Warraq: '*The Origins of the Koran*', Prometheus, New York, 1998). If these were to be accepted, Islam is in very deep trouble, for the whole edifice of Islamic belief and jurisprudence is based on the assumption of the historicity of the traditions concerning Mohammed. It is not our job to save Islam from these skeptics, but we think they are going too far.

One of the reasons why the tradition should be given the benefit of the doubt is that it contains too many admissions

against interest, accounts of less than flattering data about Mohammed and his companions (even about Mohammed being derided as a madman), clearly included because they happened to be known as factual to contemporaneous audiences and not because they served anyone's political or hagiographical interests. Another reason is that there is simply no motive for inventing most of it. In the case of certain political rules laid down by the Prophet, one could still assume strong motives on the part of later contenders for leadership to attribute this or that position to the Prophet,-- though in that case, it is strange that he was allowed to remain silent on so many contentious issues, e.g. that before his death, he wasn't made to speak out on the question of how his succession was to proceed (a matter leading to a fratricidal war, the murder of caliph Ali and his son Hussein, and the Shiite schism). But the tradition contains many uncontroversial judgments and regulations and plenty of humdrum information devoid of implications for later inter-Muslim power struggles or theological system-building; it is unlikely that this was all interpolated. This is especially true when it comes to the description of the Prophet: the Umayyad- or Abbasid-age traditionalists had nothing to gain from describing Mohammed's complexion, hygienic habits, sex life, etc. with the information they gave rather than with any other.

Even if a lot has been added to or changed in the historical data during the editing of the core Islamic text corpus, many correct data must have been preserved. In particular, if the tradition describes a pathological syndrome entirely in conformity with modern medical knowledge unavailable to the authors, it is clear that the latter cannot have invented the description but must have been describing a real case to which they or their informants had been witnesses. Dr. Somers explains:

"The reader be warned against a strange type of reasoning by certain doctors, whether historians or medics. They assume

that the preserved traditions have been written down belatedly, that they are hard to control, and that some clearly belong to mythology. Preparing a diagnosis on the basis of such uncertain data is clearly nonsense. () They forget that they are proceeding from an unproven and dubious supposition, viz. that all data in the sources are untrue and unreliable. (*) First of all, the tradition undeniably preserves a number of more or less reliable data. Secondly, modern science disposes of detailed information about all kinds of diseases. These information elements are called symptoms; they are bundled into syndromes. (*) What we now find, to our amazement, is that the facts passed on to us by the tradition correspond with the symptoms and syndromes known to modern science. Now, if these traditions describe the facts with such exactitude, they must be reliable." (p.18)*

It is one thing if someone makes a general claim that Mister X is "mad" (as in jokes about a stereotypical madcap's hilarious behaviour), but quite another when he describes in detail the typical development of the paranoia syndrome. In the latter case, either he is a student of modern psychopathology quoting a textbook description, or he is describing an actual case to which he was a witness.

Mohammed, according to Dr. Somers, was a classic case of paranoia. The syndrome of paranoia is essentially characterized by a delusion about oneself nourished by recurring hallucinations. These hallucinations may be auditory (hearing voices), visual (seeing visions or apparitions), or purely mental (being struck with sudden "insights" of enormous and unshakable certainty, not susceptible to falsification by reality). The delusion typically puts the affected person in the centre of events: either he is the target of a ubiquitous and all-powerful conspiracy (delusion of persecution) or he is the privileged

witness to a cosmic event, esp. the imminent end of the world; or he has been selected for a unique mission.

Mohammed's life-story offers only a hint at a delusion of persecution. He (and later his apologists) liked to see himself as persecuted by the Meccans, which is usually given as the reason for his migration to Yathrib/Medina. While this might have been true, the reality of his interaction with the Meccans after his migration suggests otherwise. Thus, a few months later, he lets his followers invite their families from Mecca to join them in Medina. However, if the Meccans had really been serious about confronting and "persecuting" Mohammed, it is unlikely that they would have allowed these relatives to leave, as they made perfect hostages of great strategic value in a grim confrontation.

The delusion of being privy to esoteric information about the approaching end of the world (though not about its exact timing, a prediction that would have been uncomfortably testable), also announced by some Biblical prophets, is already much more pronounced. The verses Q.15:85, 44:10/9 and 78:40 assure us that the end is nigh (as Jesus' apostles had also been made to believe). The description of the Final Judgment is one of the main recurring themes of the Quran. While partly based on Mohammed's hearsay knowledge of Jewish and Christian theology, it is charged with a strong personal involvement based on his deeply impressing visions of how the Judgment would arrive, what the fate of the different categories of men would be, and what the roles of major religious beings in it would be: that of a gloriously returning Jesus, but also that of Mohammed himself.

Mohammed's central delusion, however, was his belief, first hesitant but soon becoming unshakable, that he had been selected for a unique mission of cosmic proportions. He is God's spokesman and not just one among many, but in his age

the only spokesman, and for the remaining interval before Judgment Day also the final spokesman, the "*Seal of the Prophets*". This unique mission forms the contents of his second "revelation" on that fateful day in the month of Ramadhan, AD 610. In the first "revelation", the archangel Gabriel had ordered him: "*Read!*" (Or "*Recite!*", or "*Proclaim aloud!*"), and Mohammed had been left confused and uncomprehending. Thinking that he was becoming "a man possessed", he made up his mind to go and commit suicide, but then Gabriel appeared again, this time with a very clear message: "*O Mohammed, thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel.*" (Ishaq/Guillaume, p.106/153; Q.96:1)

This self-delusion turned the businessman Mohammed into a prophet, then a cult leader for a small secret circle, next a prominent religious leader with political ambitions, and finally the first emperor of all Arabia and founder of a conquering world religion. It forms the core of the creed pronounced by all Muslims: "*There is no God but God and Mohammed is God's prophet.*" (At this point I won't go into a theologically-linguistic discussion of the name Allah, analyzable as "the God", "the deity", sometimes used by the Pagan Arabs as a generic term for any deity, sometimes as a title for a kind of deus otiosus at the top of their pantheon, then singled out by Mohammed as the only genuine deity.) Whereas monotheism, the belief in a single God, is espoused by several other religions beside Islam, the belief in Mohammed's prophethood, which implies the belief in the divine origin of the Quran and hence the commitment to revere and obey the Quran, is the unique and defining doctrine of Islam. Sad to say, this world religion espoused by more than a billion contemporary human beings is based on a private delusion entertained by its founder.

6. Further Symptoms

Of all the founders of religions, none has left a more detailed biography than the Prophet of Islam. So, what useful infor-

mation about Mohammed's psyche can be distilled from the core texts of Islam in order to give more body to our suspicion of a paranoid condition?

About his childhood, admittedly the less public part of his life and hence less likely to yield information that was widely remembered, a few strange data emerge which can be interpreted as prodromes or pre-symptoms. As a three-year-old, he was found lying on the ground, pale and in shock, and he complained to his foster-parents (townspeople often put their children in the care of poor country folk) that two white-clad men had come and opened his belly, looking for something. His foster-mother Halima even considered returning him to his real mother, not wanting to bear the responsibility if something went wrong with the boy, and she opined to her that the boy might "have a jinn" or ghost. As indications of a latent mental problem, this is still pretty vague, but this much is clear that even as a boy, Mohammed was noticed as a special case.

When he became a young man and his vital powers were strong, these strange traits were not in evidence, but as he entered middle age, they returned. In the years preceding the start of the Quranic revelations, we know that his wife Khadija thought he had the "evil eye". For this reason, she sent him to exorcists for treatment. This again we only know in very general terms, but it corroborates the suspicion that Mohammed was predisposed to developing a mental problem, and that his contemporaries were aware of his unusual psychic complexion. When the prophetic trances became really serious, involving the vision of the archangel Gabriel, Khadija took him to the Christian godman Waraqa ibn Naufal, who certified the genuineness of Mohammed's visions. From that point onwards, her supportive attitude to her husband's initially desperate attempts to come to terms with his trances took on the character of a *folie à deux*: though not afflicted herself, she went along

with his self-delusion. She became the first believer, the first one to surrender (Islam) her common-sense judgment and take his claims as true.

More than these corroborative indications, however, it is the contents of Mohammed's hallucinations which clearly mark him as a paranoia patient. A loud voice localized in heaven or in a gigantic heavenly person speaks to him in the second person: you are the prophet, chosen to convey the words of the Creator of the Universe. He is given a uniquely central role in the cosmic scheme of things: God's final spokesman, the rightful ruler of mankind as God's vice-regent on earth, mediator for sinful mortals on the impending Day of Judgment.

The disproportion between his new self-perception and his actual social status as an ordinary businessman and later as a derided cult leader was unbearable. In fact, **intolerance of others' skepticism, along with vengefulness, is a typical trait of paranoia patients.** And so, we find Mohammed singling out each of his critics for assassination or execution. Not that other more regular tyrants haven't executed critics, but it fits Mohammed's paranoid personality, and only the non-occurrence of his campaign of vengeance against his doubters would have given us reason to doubt the diagnosis of paranoia. Incidentally, not a few of these other tyrants may also have exhibited traces of paranoia, a condition which (unlike schizophrenia and some more psychopathological syndromes) is not incompatible with worldly success. Megalomania, in particular, often provides a strong motivation for the climb to centrality and power.

7. The physical basis of a mental problem

Mohammed's megalomania may partly have been an overcompensation for the misery he had suffered, the early death of his parents and of his little sons. Yet, this purely psychological explanation of the Freudian type cannot fully

explain the strange phenomena surrounding the development of his delusion: the hallucinations and their neurological infrastructure. The denial of physical determinants in favour of purely socio-psychological explanations (for problems ranging from poor school performance to impotence), so popular from Freud down to the 1970s, has given way to a restored respect for the materiality of the human being: as a conscious subject, he may establish his freedom by skillfully sailing on the sea of his material being, but he is affected by its storms, which are not of his own mind's making. The immediate impact of psychotropic drugs on one's mental condition, for better or for worse, provides experimental proof for the relative materiality of our minds. Less sensationnally, it has now been established that the sufficient or insufficient presence of certain hormones and even of certain minerals and vitamins in the body may cause good or poor concentration, aggressiveness or passivity, euphoria or depression, or other mental states.

Therefore, it may be apt to search for physical problems underlying the Prophet's mental troubles, and this is what Dr. Somers has tried to do in his book *Een Andere Mohammed*. Of Mohammed's physical traits, one which draws the attention is that he suffered of chronic headaches, which he tried to remedy by bleeding himself in two veins in his neck. While in itself not enough to indicate a brain problem, it certainly will fit that picture as soon as more indications are found.

The mention of his falling on the ground once during a trance was earlier interpreted as an indication of epilepsy, e.g. by the Byzantine author Theophanes in his *Chronographia* (AD 814). But this is clearly unsatisfactory, not only because epilepsy is not typically accompanied by a permanent self-delusion, but mainly because one of its typical symptoms is the complete forgetfulness about even the occurrence of an epileptic fit after the recovery. Paranoid (or similar) hallucin-

nations, by contrast, leave a very strong impression on the mind.

Closer to an explicit symptomatology is Mohammed's own description of the physical sensations accompanying his trance, as Somers explains. During the initial revelations, the Prophet felt the angel's presence exerting an enormous, suffocating pressure on him. To Abdullah ibn Umar he once described the sensations typically accompanying the trance: loud noise, being hit by a mighty blow, feeling outside himself. The intensity of the sound was unbearable to his oversensitive ears (or rather his auditory brain centre), which is also why he disliked live music, a dislike later emulated by Padshah (Moghul emperor) Aurangzeb in the late 17th century and by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s as a matter of piety. Somers also quotes Ibn Sad recording the Prophet's words: *"Revelation comes to me in two ways. Sometimes Gabriel comes and speaks to me from man to man, but I forget what he says then. But sometimes he comes to me with the sound of a bell, like the roaring of many waters, so that I get into confusion. But what is revealed to me in this manner never lets go of me again."*

This indicates an identifiable neuropathological basis for Mohammed's hallucinations. As a hypothetical physiological explanation of Mohammed's mental problems, Dr. Somers suggests that very near the main sensory (auditory and visual) nerves in the mid-brain and on the front part of his pituitary gland, Mohammed may have developed a tumour. The descriptions of Mohammed's physical characteristics may indicate traces of acromegaly, a disorder involving a belatedly over-active growth hormone and leading to roughness of the extremities and a strong body odour (suggested by Mohammed's well-attested abundant use of perfumes), and that would only confirm this hypothesis. But this, of course, is more speculative than the well-established psychopathological

diagnosis of Mohammed's paranoia condition. As both Arabic scholarship and neuropathological science continue to progress, future researchers may determine more definitely what we must leave as merely an interesting hypothesis for now. Mohammed's paranoia, by contrast, is an obvious, scripturally well-attested and diagnostically articulate fact.

8. Dealing with a Mistaken Religion

Now that science has spoken out on the true nature of Mohammed's revelations, we should explore the practical implications of this new and more enlightened understanding of Islam. How to deal with our Muslim neighbours now that we realize they are the prisoners of a gigantic centuries-spanning delusion?

(1) Distinctions within Islam

The first thing to do is to cultivate a correct understanding of Islam among ourselves. **Whenever something critical is said about Islam, non-Muslims are always the first to come to its defence and to lambast the critics as "prejudiced hate-mongers" or some such unthinking hate-filled smear.** Just as the so-called "anti-anti-Communists" provided the first line of defence to Communism by countering or ridiculing every serious anti-Communist argument, **we are now faced with anti-anti-Islamism as the first major roadblock on the way to a candid analysis of the Islamist problem.** Many Hindus and other non-Muslims have a romanticized view of Islam centred on Sufi poetry and vague reminiscences of civilizational successes during the bygone Golden Age of Islam. For the sake of argument, we may concede for now that these are indeed meritorious contributions of Islam. The point is then to distinguish within Islam its different components.

Charming achievements such as algebra, Arabic calligraphy or the basic and most attractive ideas of Sufi mysticism are all

external to Islam. Arabic calligraphy, geometrical ornamentation on mosque walls and other non-figurative aesthetic developments were stimulated by the Islamic prohibition on the depiction of human or animal life; but they were no more than variants on art forms which have existed outside and before Islam as well. Algebra and other sciences were borrowed from India, China or Greece, as the Arab conquerors readily admitted, witness their name for the so-called Arabic numerals, viz. *rakmu'l-Hindi*, "Indian numerals" (written from left to right, like the Indian and unlike the Arabic scripts); the belief that they were in possession of the true religion was enough to bolster their pride, so they could honestly concede other achievements to other nations. The central aim of Sufism, the self-extinction in the merger with God, is obviously borrowed from Buddhist and Vedantic sources. Initially the orthodox clergy persecuted outspoken Sufis who said blasphemous things like "*anâ'l Haq*" ("I am the True One", Arabic translation of the Upanishadic dictum "*Aham Brahmasmi*"), because they saw through its un-Islamic inspiration, but later they adapted and domesticated Sufism into an acceptable Islamic form of devotion for both the spiritual eccentrics and the sentimental illiterate masses.

At any rate, all these attractive sideshows of Islam can be evaluated separately without judging the defining beliefs of Islam. Even within Islamic theology proper, a distinction must be made. Firstly, there is a distinction between general religiosity or ethics and the specifically Islamic innovations. Partly in order to gain respectability, Mohammed included in the Quran and in his own sayings many elements of traditional morality, injunctions against stealing, slander, child abuse or marital infidelity. This can be compared with Moses' *Ten Commandments*, where his own theological innovations (monotheism, taboo on idolatry, taboo on uttering the God-name,

keeping a weekly day of rest) are coupled with age-old moral rules against lying, stealing, disrespect to parents, adultery etc. In both Moses' and Mohammed's case, the intention seemed to be to confer the authority of age-old morality upon the prophet's own innovative religious ideas. The net result is at any rate that a believer in the Bible or the Quran can truthfully say that his Holy Book has taught him morality. That much in the Quran deserves respect: elements of universal ethics which are not specifically Islamic, but which nonetheless have come to form a part of Islam.

Even in the theological core which defines Islam as distinct from other religions, a further distinction must be made, one which practically coincides with the two assertions of the Islamic creed: monotheism ("there is no God but Allah") and the belief in Mohammed's prophethood ("and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah"). Monotheism, the belief in the oneness of the Divine, can be deduced from different sources of inspiration, not merely the Bible or the Quran. One can discern a kind of monotheism in Aristotle's philosophy or in Stoicism, it has been claimed for Zarathustra's religion of Ahura Mazda, and even Hindu devotionalism to Vishnu or Shiva is sometimes conceived as monotheistic. Within the monotheistic framework, Medieval and Renaissance philosophers (al-Arabi, Cusanus, Bruno, Galilei, Leibniz, et al.) have developed profound conceptions of consciousness and the universe. In principle, it is possible to subscribe to monotheism without developing the allegedly typical problematic features of the major monotheistic religions, viz. their intolerance. So, if your Muslim neighbour says "Alhamdulillah" (Praise be to Allah) or some other Allah invocation, please don't jump to jihadic conclusions. He may well mean exactly the same thing intended by a Hindu who invokes Bhagwan. The real problem arises when he understands God / Allah as exclusively the character revealed in the Quran -

the collection of sayings which Mohammed claimed to have heard from a supernatural source identified as the Archangel Gabriel.

The ultimate core of Islam is not Allah and monotheism, but Mohammed and prophethood. Monotheism is a fairly widespread idea, but Mohammed and his Quran are truly the defining elements of Islam. If the oneness of God can conditionally be accepted as a valid manner of speaking about the Divine, there can be no compromise with Mohammed's deluded belief in his exclusive telephone line with Heaven. Here, we hit the radically irrational and unacceptable core of Islam. Here, there is no room for sweet-talk, even if only metaphorically or figuratively intended, of a "basic unity" or "equal truth" of all religions. The defining core belief of Islam is wrong. It is nothing but the paranoid delusion of an ordinary early-medieval Arab businessman. Putting such vain self-delusion on a par with the profound insights of a Yajnavalkya, a Buddha, a Confucius, a Laozi or a Socrates, is plainly absurd.

(2) Speaking Out

Speaking with Muslims about the deluded basis of Islam may initially prove to be difficult both for non-Muslims and for ex-Muslims. Believers will not like to hear criticism of Islam from anyone, but in a paradoxical way, they will tolerate more of it from non-Muslims who enjoy the benefit of their unbeliever status. In the present world, Muslims have had to accept at least the existence of unbelievers, and **an unbeliever is by definition one who doesn't believe in Mohammed's prophetic claims.** After all, if he believed in Mohammed's claim to prophethood, he would accept the validity of the Quran and hence the whole contents of the Quran, and by accepting all that, he would by definition be a Muslim. So, in private conversation, subject to rules of politeness and diplomacy, a non-Muslim has a certain freedom to express his doubts about

the core belief of Islam. There is no need to be intrusive with your message, as most Muslims spontaneously bring up the subject of the relative superiority of one religion vis-à-vis another once in a while.

For born Muslims, introducing critical questions about Islam is more difficult, as it amounts to a statement of apostasy, a crime punishable by death under Islamic law. Yet, it is mainly these enlightened ex-Muslims who will do the job of opening the exit gate from Islam for their Muslim-born brothers and sisters. It is helpful and meritorious if we non-Muslims speak our minds about the fundamental questions of religion, but our influence on Muslim audiences will always be much more limited. We may work for the inclusion of properly scientific information in all general textbooks of religious history, so that Muslim children in state-funded schools will be exposed to a more enlightened view of Mohammed's prophecies; but we should expect many Muslims to distrust and reject all such information emanating from unbeliever sources. By contrast, born and bred Muslims who have shaken off the veil of the faith and exposed themselves to the light of Reason may have more impact on the Muslim masses, which is why it is also much more dangerous for them to speak their minds.

However, I am confident that recent developments in communications technology, particularly the entry of satellite television and the internet in even the remotest harems of Arabia, will profoundly alter the mental climate in the Muslim world. So far, a lot of the authority wielded by the orthodox clergy over their flock was purely the result of the latter's ignorance about the world outside Islam. Most Muslims have grown up with caricatured enemy-images of Western and Asian cultures, which made it that much easier for them to identify civilization and morality with their own familiar Islam. In the

next decade, their mental horizon is bound to widen dramatically.

Already, websites hosted by ex-Muslims centralize all the information about the dark side of Islam, about persecutions of non-Muslims and injustices to women, and more consequentially, about the irrationality and unsustainability of the core beliefs defining Islam. Books can be burned and speeches interrupted by the police, but the newer forms of communication are very discrete and can penetrate into the private rooms of every inquisitive Muslim.

(3) The Alternative

Experience in the secularized West has shown that apostasy from religion can have unpleasant side-effects. On the one hand, people are better informed and more open and honest about touchy subjects. On the other hand, many people flush out ethics and self-restraint along with the religion which they have come to see as irrational and obsolete. In this sense, one can sympathize with those Muslims who fear that a weakening of Islam will lead to immorality, hedonism, crass consumerism, flaky quasi-religions (whether political, sex-centred or occultist) and a general lowering of cultural standards. If the world of non-Islam gets identified with Hollywood, McDonalds and Playboy, it is understandable that Muslims will cling to the devil they know rather than expose themselves to the intruding devils from the West.

This is where Hinduism and other Asian spiritual traditions have a key role to play. They have to show the Muslims that there is life after apostasy from an irrational belief system. They have to prove that **religion can be something else than a silly acceptance of some prophet's vainglorious claims about himself**. In the case of India, it is even very simple: Muslims are surrounded by the heirs of one of the great spiritual traditions of mankind. Hindus have to cultivate or rekindle the

best in their tradition, and Indian Muslims merely have to switch off a few centuries of Islamic alienation and return to their native civilization still alive all around them.

-- *Leuven (Belgium), 14 August 2004*